

Editor's Note

As readers of the *Afro-Hispanic Review* may have noticed, I have used the Editor's Note to describe activities, trips, ideas, and experiences pertinent to the journal's mission. Increasingly so, I have taken the liberty of relying on the same space to observe, describe, and share more intimate experiences with the hopes of shedding new light on a given subject. In recent Notes, I describe my trips to China and my interaction with newly found members of my father's family. Having been born and raised in New York City, these trips have allowed me to revisit my relationship with my father's culture and become familiar with the customs of our family. I have also done the same with my mother's culture, family, and country of origin. Though travel to Cuba is difficult, as a researcher, the island is more accessible to me. In the present Note, I share with our readers my friendship with Rolando Estévez and my visit to his native city of Matanzas. As a child I had visited the main tourist attractions of Matanzas, a province that borders my mother's province of Las Villas, but this was my first trip to the namesake city. Estévez's descriptions and my knowledge of Cuba's history and literature allowed me greater insight into Cuba's past (and present), which I now share with our readers.

Rolando Estévez came to my attention many decades ago as designer and publisher of Ediciones Vigía, in particular as the person responsible for creating beautiful and imaginative handcrafted books printed in limited editions in Matanzas. With the kindness of friends living in Cuba and the United States, I acquired Juan Francisco Manzano's *Treinta años* and Nancy Morejón's *Poesías*, among others. These samples of Vigía books were made with leaves, twigs, kernels of corn, and other natural materials.

Juanamaría Cordones Cook's invitation to participate in *Cultural Bricolage* (sponsored by the University of Missouri, Columbia, from November 10–14, 2012) made it possible for me to meet Estévez. In fact, it was during the reception at Juanamaría's home to honor both Morejón and Estévez that Nancy, whom I had known for many years, introduced me to him. I encountered a perceptive and focused, slender man, of medium height and age, with facial hair, sporting a headscarf. He seemed a little overwhelmed by the attention he rightfully deserved, and I was touched by his friendliness and willingness to share his knowledge with everyone who approached him. After my initial contact with Morejón and Estévez I shared with Nancy the idea of preparing a monographic issue on his multifaceted work and her own writings. As *Cultural Bricolage* unfolded, I had the opportunity to explore more fully Estévez's artistic talents, book designs, drawings, and poetry. With the informative panels, presentations, readings, performances, and the presence of Estévez's exiled sister, there was little time to engage him in any substantive conversation. Before the end of the conference I pursued with Estévez the desire to

prepare a monographic issue that featured his work, which he seemed delighted to hear and willing to help prepare. I also conveyed to him my plans to travel to Cuba the following summer to complete research on the life and works of the slave poet Manzano, which included a trip to Matanzas. He enthusiastically offered to host me in Matanzas, and put me in touch with a leading scholar in the field.

I traveled to Havana in early June of 2013, and a week or so later I made my way to Matanzas, where I spent three delightful and intensive days with Estévez. Unlike the event in Columbia, Missouri—even though in Matanzas he was busy teaching two classes and staging a performance—Estévez appeared to be more relaxed and in his element. He offered to be my personal guide and was anxious to tell me about the history of a city he dearly loved and fully embraced. Matanzas of the nineteenth century, also known as the Athens of Cuba, was a prosperous center, with splendid literary works, music, paintings, and glorious architecture. We walked from one end of the city to the other, sometimes more than fifteen kilometers a day under the blistering and oppressive Cuban midday summer sun. As the Honorable Son of Matanzas, Estévez could easily be the city's official historian; he has a powerful command of dates of buildings, architectural designs, and historical events.

After completing his teaching obligations, Estévez picked me up at the boardinghouse where I was staying on Contreras Street. We walked a few blocks to visit the house believed to be owned by Doña Beatriz Jústiz de Santa Ana, Manzano's first master, who treated him like a privileged, white child. The two-story mansion sits on a corner and dominates a significant portion of the two intersecting streets. The structure features a wooden double door entrance with a stylish wrought iron arch, neither of which has withstood the test of time. Though still elegant, the building had become a victim of a decaying economy. We entered the front door, passed through what could have been the vestibule, and crossed into the interior courtyard. Visible were the many clothes lines strung from one side to the other, airing bed sheets, trousers, and some personal items. These articles obstructed a clear vision to what were now small, parceled living quarters that sheltered many individual families. I looked back from the middle of the courtyard towards the entrance and saw two massive arches that indicated the original grandeur of this nineteenth-century mansion.

We continued from the mansion to the Barrio de la Marina, which borders the Yumurí River. Once known to house blacks and slaves, in the present La Marina continues to lodge poor and black Cubans or, stated differently, poor Afro-Cubans. In the countryside, slaves were sheltered in wooden *barracones*, located on the owner's land, but in the city the masters sent their slaves to live in cement structures outlined by a unified roofline. In the post-slavery period, the *barracones* were

modified to accommodate doors, windows, and some even had second story balconies. Many of the residents, if not all of them, are blacks and practitioners of one or more of Cuba's Afro-Cuban religions, Regla de Ocha, Ifá, Palo Monte, and Abakuá. These same religions comforted those uprooted from their homelands and helped to link them to their past. From there, we followed the river towards the bay, passing one of its many bridges, the Puente de la Concordia, for Matanzas is also known as the city of many bridges and rivers.

Later, Estévez and I reached the elegant Sauto Theatre, with its neoclassic architecture and Carrera marble statues of Greek goddesses that line the lobby; the building was designed by the Italian Daniele Dell'Aglio and inaugurated in April of 1863. The Sauto could easily have been the object of admiration in any European capital city, but its presence in Matanzas clearly reveals the riches that sugar and slavery brought to the city. Suffice it to say that luminary figures like Sarah Bernhardt, Anna Pavlova, and Enrique Caruso performed at the Sauto.

We made our way to the Vigía Plaza, whose corner building houses Ediciones Vigía, named after the plaza, and light source that marked the entrance to the San Juan River. The two-story building has been fully restored, even though the main staircase had been repositioned to a more accessible area. During working hours six or seven workers greet visitors. They are mostly women sitting around three tables covered by ongoing projects. Additional administrative offices can be found towards the back and off of the interior courtyard.

Estévez's workspace is located on the second floor. To the right of the top of the stairs, there is a large room with wooden bookcases containing samples of the Vigía books. The main wall features a beautiful large map of the city of Mantanzas. However, as you approach it, what appears to be a unified painting is a picture made up of thousands of smaller pieces, as if a complex puzzle had been assembled on the wall. Passing beyond this space and into the next one, a large outdoor terrace overlooks the plaza and to the right, the San Juan River. At night a cool breeze embraces the terrace and provides a respite from the summer heat. Estévez's office is located to the other side of the stairs. Long and somewhat narrow, the space is covered with posters, paintings, framed covers, figurines, bottles of different shapes and colors, art supplies, and a table Estévez uses to work his magic.

After a brief visit to Ediciones Vigía, a location to which we returned a handful of times, we sauntered down to the San Juan River. On the way, we observed the many palaces, with high, wrought iron windows and three-layered Spanish tiled roofs, each with its own individual characteristics. Some of the mansions that lined the San Juan had two entrances, a commercial one that faced the river and a more elegant one opened to the next street, indicating the one-

block depth of these enormous structures. The wealthy people lived in Versailles, the poor in La Marina, and as the city began to expand to the other side of the San Juan, Pueblo Nuevo emerged.

When looking across the river and to the left, towards the entrance of the bay, three bridges are visible. The two closest to me, made of steel, captured my attention, since the distant third one was a highway of recent vintage. The middle one was a rotating bridge, constructed to turn from the center with the effort of a single worker. It once allowed tall vessels to enter and exit the river. The nearest one is a single spanned bridge, which replaced the nineteenth-century wooden structure Manzano mentions in his sonnet “A la ciudad de Matanzas después de una larga ausencia,” composed in 1830, as the speaker is marveled by a changing and growing city:

Testigo un tiempo, campo venturoso
De tu maleza fui: manglar y uvero
En ti mecerse contempló el viajero
Que frecuentó tu seno montuoso.

Ya en vano busco desde el puente añoso
Tus uvas, mangles, ni el pajizo alero
De la abatida choza, do el Montero
Su indigencia ocultó, mendigo, ocioso.

Todo desapareció, tu plaza crece
Y a par huyendo, dejante poblado
Selva, maleza y campesina sombra.

Tamaña variedad júbilo ofrece,
Pues quien se abandonó tan desmedrado
Hoy con placer filial te ve y te asombra.

Indeed, Matanzas is the city of bridges and rivers, the latter exemplified by the San Juan, the Yumurí, and the Canímar, and in their own way the rivers symbolize Oshún, the Virgin of Charity, deity of the river, thus making Matanzas a female city in which Oshún reigns.

Estévez knew of my passion for the nineteenth century and interest in Manzano, and he eagerly showed me the land where the slave poet worked and was punished—according to Manzano’s “Autobiografía”—for no apparent reason. The afternoon of Father’s Day we headed for Los Molinos, the sugar mill the Marquesa del Prado Ameno sent Manzano to be punished, the same one he writes about in his “Autobiografía.” Located on the outskirts of Matanzas, in the contemporary period the property houses an old ice factory, a few homes, and a catfish farm. We walked the same land Manzano traversed, looking for a semblance of a larger home unknown to the current residents. We made our way across what used to be acreages

of sugarcane fields, down to the San Juan River. The river plays an important role in Manzano's "Autobiografía." In the handwritten version, he mentions that he used to go for walks by the river with the Marquesa; in the one corrected by Suárez y Romero, Manzano states that (instead of walking with the Marquesa) he went fishing with Estorino. The change in the narration reveals the improbability that the Marquesa went for walks with her slave. We paused by the idyllic and serene shore of the San Juan, listening to the river flow, seeking protection from the hot sun under the trees, feeling the cool, soft breeze, and observing the palm trees anchored to the opposite shore. A reduced area of sugarcane fields lay beyond. The immense property stretched from as far as we could see past the river to the road many acres behind us, belonged to Manzano's master.

The last day of my stay Estévez took me to visit the house of the mulato poet, Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés, also known as Plácido. He even knocked on the door, introduced himself, and asked the current owner to allow us to see its interior. The resident, a lovely, older woman who proudly claimed to be Plácido's widow, had kept the house in nearly its original condition. But, had she the necessary resources, she preferred to modernize parts of it. For the most part, the house is close to the way it was when Plácido occupied it, with high ceilings and arched doorways, a vestibule, an old style kitchen counter, a separate sink, and a bathroom with the original tub. The house still preserves the old charm, evinced by the original well and cistern. "Plácido's widow" even admitted to feeling the mulato poet's presence in the house.

This part of the visit included a trip to the hospital where Plácido spent the last days of his life, before his execution as the presumed leader of the Ladder Conspiracy of 1844 to kill whites. A bust of the mulato poet, positioned at the main entrance of the hospital, welcomes visitors. The accompanying memorial plaque contains the following inscription:

A la memoria
del insigne poeta
Gabriel de la
Concepción Valdés
—Plácido—
injustamente fusi-
lado por las auto-
ridades españolas

el 28 de junio de
1844 al frente de
este Hospital.

Plácido was detained in a chapel located off the main lobby. The chapel has two doors, one across from the other. If entered from the lobby, this one features iron bars, perhaps typical of the period; the other one is made of wood, with a small glass window. A high iron bar window to the left offers additional light. The space seemed small for a chapel and appeared closer to what I imagined to be the size of a prison or detention cell. The room contained a few framed documents on the wall pertinent to Plácido's execution, including a picture of Plácido and another one of his handmade mother of pearl hair combs. Unfortunately, few hospital workers appeared to know the history of that turbulent past, one that was visible on a plaque placed one century later above the cell door:

En este local estuvo la capilla donde el excelso poeta
cubano Gabriel de la Concepción Valdés (Plácido) vivió las
horas angustiosas que precedieron a su injusto fusilamiento,
verificado por tropas españolas frente a la explanada de este
hospital en la infausta mañana del 28 de junio de 1844.

Su "Plegaria a Dios", que compuso en este mismo lugar,
pone de relieve la superioridad de su alma y el tesoro lírico
de su corazón piadoso y bueno.

En la fecha del centenario de su caída, dejamos grabada
sobre esta lápida, como un homenaje a su memoria, la sexta-
na final de su "Plegaria a Dios".

Mas, si cuadra a tu suma omnipotencia
que yo perezca cual malvado impío
y que los hombres mi cadaver frío
ultrajen con maligna complacencia,
suene tu voz y acabe mi existencia,
"cúmplase en mí tu voluntad, Dios mío".

28 de junio 1944

In the last line of the poem, Plácido places his fate in God's hands. The engraving reinforces the contention that Plácido was conveniently accused of masterminding what I believe to be a fabricated conspiracy to eliminate a growing black middle class population, some of whom were also slave holders.

The commission processed 4,000 people. Of these, 93 were condemned to death, 600 to imprisonment, 400 to expulsion, and 300 perished during the process. Plácido implicated Manzano in the conspiracy, and the slave poet received a one-year jail sentence. Plácido proclaimed his innocence until the very end.

It was surreal to share the same space where Plácido spent the last days of his life, as it was magical to walk from the entrance of the hospital down the hill to the river where Plácido and other coconspirators were executed. I felt the need

to stand in the location of the execution, reconstruct in my mind the sequence of events, and relive Plácido's tragic death. I said a few words in solidarity with those who were murdered.

We also visited other important historical sites, such as the home of the poet José Jacinto Milanés, which houses the city's *Archivo Histórico*. This beautiful nineteenth-century structure has an interior courtyard and furnishings of the period. It features a sizable living room with stunning neoclassic wooden bookcases and a tall and wide freestanding mirror. The same space also displays the card catalogue, and the administrative offices occupy several of the other rooms. As with most of the libraries I visited in this trip, the books and manuscripts were in extremely poor conditions, many of them victims of woodworm holes. Though Milanés's home had been recently renovated, the construction workers neglected to attend to the water supply, thus rendering the facilities inoperable for extended periods of time. Milanés, Manzano, and Plácido wrote during the same period, and they are among the founding writers of Cuba's national literature and culture.

From there, we walked to the San Severino Fortress. Built in the eighteenth century by slaves, it is located at the western entrance of the bay and stands as Matanzas's oldest building. As we approached this military installation, Estévez and I descended into the moat to better see the marking on the stones left by the slaves. Unlike Macchu Picchu, Henri Christophe's Citadel, or even the sections I visited of the Great Wall of China, the slaves of San Severino covered the walls with symbols. A few carvings resembled the boats that transported the slaves from their place of origin to their new destination. Others were more difficult to decipher; and some even appeared to be religious *firmas*.

San Severino has another dubious history; for it was here that the Spanish government imprisoned and executed Cubans fighting for the independence of their country, during the Ten Years' War (1868–1878) and the War of Independence (1895–1898). The firing squad marched the prisoners through the moat and to a wall left of the main entrance beneath a tree, whose roots have engulfed the wall as if to feed from the pouring blood of the lifeless bodies. Outside of the fortress, on the other side of the moat where the guards shot the prisoners, there is a plaque in honor of Cuba's fallen heroes with the following inscription:

Los Exploradores
De
Matanzas
A Los Mártires Fusilados En Este Lugar
Por Defender
La Libertad De La Patria

24 de febrero de 1915

William Luis

My visit to Matanzas of the nineteenth century moved me in ways I cannot fully understand or explain. After this and other experiences in Mantanzas and Havana, I feel more strongly connected to Cuba's past. As the grandson of Don Ventura Santos Santos, himself the son of an *hacendado* and his slave, I proudly embrace my mother's Cuban heritage. Don Ventura was a *mambí*, and fought as a captain in Cuba's Liberation Army. He was also the founder of the San Juan Masonic Lodge of Caibarién, Las Villas, and was honored with the rank of Master Mason. History and literature are roads to understanding our past. I am grateful to my host, Rolando Estévez. I want to thank him for making my visit a most memorable occasion.

The present issue spotlights the works of Rolando Estévez and Nancy Morejón. While Morejón is a long-time friend and a visible figure in the *Afro-Hispanic Review*, many may not be familiar with Estévez. Some may even wonder about his presence in the journal. Suffice it to say that Estévez and Morejón represent two important aspects of the ever-changing Cuban culture. As we have seen at the outset of my introduction, Estévez is a designer, a bookmaker, an artist, an editor, and a poet, and each of his works, including his poetry, captures an essential image of his revered Cuba and in particular his native city of Matanzas. Estévez offers a unique perspective, for it is not the same to see Cuba from the center, as it is to see the same country from the margins. Vigía has crafted an ample selection of works that collectively symbolize the Cuban nation, including those of Manzano, Plácido, and Morejón among other works of interest to our readers. Estévez has a strong connection to Cuba's African past. Allow me to direct the reader's attention to poems such as "Embrujo del Hotel Nacional," "En Centro Habana hallé la Fragua de Vulcano," and "Testigo de las aguas dulces," from his collection *Los ojos en la poma*. Additionally, Estévez is an *iyawó* in the Ifá religion.

The cover is taken from Morejón's *La Habana expuesta*, published by Ediciones Vigía in 2012. If Estévez writes about Matanzas, in this beautiful collection of poems Morejón captures the images of her beloved city, of its people and her family.

I am grateful to Estévez and Morejón for making possible this monographic issue of the *Afro-Hispanic Review*.

William Luis,
Editor